

NORTH KOREA: THE ROGUE NATION

SINCE WORLD WAR II, A COMMUNIST REGIME IN THE HANDS OF A SINGLE FAMILY HAS RULED NORTH KOREA. TODAY, WHILE THE PEOPLE GO HUNGRY, THE REGIME DIVERTS SCARCE RESOURCES TO A HUGE MILITARY AND NUCLEAR WEAPONS DEVELOPMENT.

When the Japanese surrendered in 1945, the Soviet Union and the United States agreed to temporarily divide and occupy Korea, an ancient land seized by Japan in 1910. American-occupied South Korea held elections that led to the creation of the Republic of Korea with Seoul as its capital.

The Soviet dictator, Joseph Stalin, appointed Kim Il-Sung to rule North Korea. Kim (Korean family names come first) was a Korean communist and major in the Soviet Red Army who had fought the Japanese in China.

Kim and other Korean communists established the Democratic People's Republic of Korea with its capital at Pyongyang. Kim developed a form of communism that stressed a self-supporting economy and strong military with him as the leader for life.

He followed Stalin's model of emphasizing heavy industry (e.g., steel making) run by the government. Also like Stalin, Kim confiscated privately owned land to form large farms where the farmers worked for the government.

Kim wanted to re-unify Korea by taking the South by military force. With the help of the Soviet Union, he built a huge military. Then he convinced Stalin that the Americans would never interfere if he invaded South Korea. U.S. occupation forces had withdrawn from Korea in 1949.



THIS MASSIVE STATUE of Kim Il-Sung stands in the capital of North Korea. More than 500 statues of Kim dot the North Korean landscape.

Wikimedia Commons—John Pavelka

In June 1950, Kim launched an invasion of South Korea. U.S. President Harry S. Truman quickly ordered American troops to aid the South Koreans. His decision to intervene backed his recently announced Truman Doctrine, which declared that the U.S. would act to contain communist aggression.

The newly formed United Nations condemned the North Korean attack and called for member nations to help defend South Korea. The combined U.S. and U.N. forces pushed the North Koreans back all the way to North Korea's border with China.

At this point, communist China entered the war on the side of North Korea. Battle lines then moved back and forth until both sides signed an armistice in July 1953.

The armistice was not a peace treaty. Even today, almost 60 years later, the Korean War technically has not ended. The armistice did create a Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). This is a military-free zone 2.5 miles wide that today forms the border between North and South Korea.

'Great Leader'

During the war, North Korea lost half a million soldiers, countless numbers of civilians, and most of its industry. After the war, Kim forced workers to participate in "speed battles" to rebuild heavy industry, but he neglected consumer goods. Kim fed the nation by rationing the harvests from the large government farms.

For a while, the emphasis on industrial production pushed North Korea ahead of South Korea economically. But North Korean industrial goods were so shoddy that few countries wanted to buy them. This deprived the country of foreign currency needed to import fuel oil, spare parts, consumer goods, and food.

Kim also diverted nearly a third of the nation's economic production to rebuild his military. He never gave up his ambition to conquer the South.

North Korea depended heavily on borrowed money, aid, and discounted prices on imports from the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union fell in the early 1990s, ►

however, North Korea lost most of its trade privileges with Russia and the other countries that emerged from the Soviet Union. Soon, the economy began to collapse.

Calling himself “Great Leader,” Kim announced in 1980 that his son, Kim Jong-Il, would succeed him as the leader of North Korea. The “Great Leader” appointed his son to important Communist Party and military positions. As the elder Kim grew older, he passed on more governing authority to his son.

When Kim Il-Sung died in 1994, after 48 years of dictatorship, Kim Jong-Il took over. The new Kim, age 53, instructed his people to call him “Dear Leader.”

‘Dear Leader’

The “Dear Leader” indulges himself with luxuries like imported brandy and multiple palaces. His marriage status is unclear. He has had numerous mistresses who gave birth to most of his children, including three sons.

Soon after Kim inherited the role of supreme leader, North Korea suffered a famine brought on by floods and droughts and made worse by the regime’s mismanaged economy.

The regime cut food rations, which led to widespread starvation.

A Human Rights Watch report concluded that the famine in the late 1990s “killed millions of people and stunted the development of many children for life.” While this horror was going on, the government diverted much of the food supply to the regime elite and the military.

The mass starvation finally forced Kim to accept food aid from the United Nations and donor countries such as South Korea, China, Japan, and the United States. Kim, however, rejected free market reforms that would have increased food production.

Today, the North Korean people continue to suffer from shortages of food and consumer goods. In addition, the Kim regime spends less on health care for its people than any other nation in the world.

Having few exports to sell, North Korea buys some imported goods with profits from opium poppy production and by counterfeiting U.S. dollars. Even so, North Korea remains dependent on international aid for much of its food needs. Kim’s military currently consumes 25 percent of the nation’s economic production.

Kim holds on to power by keeping regime and military leaders happy while repressing the people. The regime trains its people in the schools, workplace, and military to believe that the “Dear Leader” can do no wrong.

The regime controls all television, radio, and newspapers. Internet use is limited to trusted members of the regime and military. Those who dissent or even displease the regime are condemned to slave labor prisons, sometimes with their entire families.

North Korea’s Neighbors

Since the Korean War, North Korea has occasionally met with South Korea to discuss reunifying the country. These talks have resulted in a few minor agreements that usually

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included the South sending food and other aid to the North.

Every time both sides reached an agreement, however, North Korea seemed to sabotage the effort with violent acts like trying to assassinate two of South Korea’s presidents. Some experts think this behavior by North Korea is a way to pressure the South Koreans for new talks that will yield more aid.

Most Russian military and economic aid to North Korea has disappeared since the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Relations with Japan worsened recently. Japan discovered that in the 1970s, North Korea kidnapped some of its citizens and forced them to train spies in the Japanese language and culture.

Today, the Kim regime’s only foreign support comes from China. The Chinese prop up North Korea with trade and aid because they fear that if the Kim regime collapses, millions of North Korean refugees will flood into China.

‘Military First’

Kim has a “military first” policy. His army, navy, and air force prosper even as the North Korean people go hungry. North Korea now has the fifth largest military in the world with over a million members.

Kim has deployed 70 percent of his ground forces close to the DMZ



KIM JONG-IL SUCCEEDED his father as leader of North Korea. He has been in ill health and reportedly is preparing his son Kim Jong-Un to succeed him.

Wikimedia Commons attributed to www.kremlin.ru

border with South Korea. He also has trained an elite corps of Special Operation Forces whose mission is to spearhead an invasion of the South. In addition, large numbers of long-range artillery, some with chemical warheads, could easily destroy the South Korean capital of Seoul less than 40 miles away.

North Korea also possesses hundreds of missiles that can strike all parts of South Korea and Japan. The North Koreans are working on a long-range missile that may someday be able to reach the U.S., possibly with a nuclear warhead. The Kim regime has sold its missile technology to other countries as another way to get foreign currency to buy needed imports.

Nuclear Weapons

The Soviet Union helped North Korea build its main nuclear research facility at Yongbyong after the Korean War. While declaring the nuclear facility was only for developing electric power, Kim Il-Sung really wanted to produce nuclear weapons to prevent the U.S. from threatening his regime.

In 1985, North Korea signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). This prohibited North Korea from manufacturing nuclear weapons or assisting other countries in making them. The NPT also required North Korea to accept U.N. inspectors to monitor its nuclear program. In 1992, North and South Korea agreed not to “test, manufacture, produce, receive, possess, store, display, or use nuclear weapons.”

In 1994, soon after Kim Il-Sung died, North Korea and the U.S. signed an Agreed Framework to “freeze” the Yongbyong nuclear program with U.N. inspection. In exchange, the U.S. promised to coordinate annual oil shipments to North Korea until an international group built two nuclear power plants there.

Kim Jong-Il, however, secretly acquired advanced nuclear weapons



A NORTH KOREA SOLDIER (left) eyes a South Korean soldier at the Demilitarized Zone separating the two Koreas.

Defense Imagery.mil

technology from Pakistan. In 2002, the U.S. confronted the North Koreans with evidence that they had been producing enriched uranium in order to develop nuclear weapons. The North Koreans denied this.

The U.S. accused North Korea of violating the Agreed Framework and the no nuclear weapons treaty with South Korea. Construction of the two nuclear power plants for North Korea stopped.

The North Koreans retaliated by expelling the U.N. nuclear inspectors, restarting nuclear operations at Yongbyong, and withdrawing from the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Despite signing this treaty in 1985, North Korea has sold nuclear weapons materials and technology to Iran, Syria, and other nations.

Six Party Talks

Under pressure from China, North Korea agreed in 2004 to return to nuclear weapons negotiations. The Six Party Talks included the U.S., China, Russia, Japan, South Korea, and North Korea. In 2005, the North Koreans committed themselves to “abandoning” their nuclear program in exchange for economic assistance and a pledge from the U.S. not to attack.

In 2006, however, North Korea conducted intermediate- and long-range missile tests followed by its

first underground test of a nuclear explosive device. The next year the North Koreans were back at the Six Party Talks. They agreed to “disable” nuclear operations at Yongbyong under U.N. inspection if the other parties would provide economic and food aid.

Then in 2009, North Korea carried out a long-range missile test and a second test of a nuclear explosive device. This time the U.N. passed a resolution, calling on member nations to seize North Korean ships or planes, carrying any materials for nuclear weapons. North Korea withdrew from the Six Party Talks, expelled U.N. inspectors again, and again restarted operations at Yongbyong.

By early 2011, the Six Party Talks had not resumed. North Korea has expanded its uranium enrichment operation.

What Next?

Kim Jong-Il, now 69, suffered a stroke in 2008. As a result, he apparently chose his youngest son, Kim Jong-Un, to succeed him. We know little of this son’s background or about how he would lead North Korea. Even his age, 28 or 29, is uncertain.

Kim Jong-Il recently speeded up the process of preparing his son to take control of North Korea by ►

appointing him to top Communist Party and military positions. Publicly called “Young General,” Kim Jong-Un’s youth and inexperience might pose a problem if he tries to replace his father within the next few years. Some speculate that a power struggle could erupt among Kim family members, the military could seize power, or even a civil war could break out.

The U.S. is re-evaluating its negotiations with North Korea. Both the South Koreans and Americans now see a pattern in North Korean diplomacy. First, the North Koreans create a crisis like testing missiles. Then, they call for negotiations to get food and other assistance in exchange for agreements they never intend to carry out.

Many experts believe that what Kim Jong-Il most wants is the survival of his regime. Possessing nuclear weapons would be powerful insurance for this. Although the North Koreans have tested a nuclear device, they have yet to produce a deliverable nuclear weapon such as a missile warhead. Therefore, the decision about what policy the U.S. should now adopt toward North Korea is at a crucial stage.

FOR DISCUSSION AND WRITING

1. Some argue that international food assistance for North Korea’s suffering people should be cut off since this aid helps the Kim regime stay in power. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

2. In 2010, the North Koreans torpedoed a South Korean warship and shelled a South Korean island. Why do you think they did this?
3. Does North Korea pose a threat to the United States? Why or why not?

FOR FURTHER READING

“Background Note: North Korea.” U.S. Department of State. 29 Sept. 2010. URL: www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2792.htm

Bechtol, Bruce E. *Defiant Failed State, The North Korean Threat to International Security*. Washington, D. C.: Potomac Books, 2010.

ACTIVITY

U.S. Policy Toward North Korea

Form small groups. Each will take on the role of a national security team to advise the president on what policy to adopt toward North Korea. Each team should discuss the options listed below and adopt a policy to recommend. The policy may consist of one of those listed, a combination of two or more of them, as well as additional ideas developed by the team. Each team should prepare to defend its policy based on information from this article.

Policy Options

- Wait for the regime to collapse, which may happen when Kim Jong-Il dies or can no longer function as leader. The U.S. and China could then cooperate to establish a new non-nuclear North Korea.
- Build up the military defenses of South Korea to deter another attack by North Korea. The U.S. would have to maintain or increase its military forces stationed in South Korea since the Korean War.
- Attack North Korea and overthrow the totalitarian Kim regime.
- Destroy Yongbyong and other nuclear facilities with air strikes.
- Isolate and contain North Korea by enforcing U.N. restrictions on its ability to import or export missiles and any nuclear materials or technology.
- Resume the Six Party Talks to offer economic aid and a promise of no attack on North Korea, thus assuring the survival of the Kim regime.
- Support long-term negotiations between North Korea and South Korea, aiming at eventual reunification. Kim Jong-Il once proposed a confederation (“one country, two systems”) pathway to reunification.

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